

1. Executive Summary

Passenger Focus is pleased to have been invited by the Department for Transport to make a submission to help inform its drafting of the specification for the new Essex Thameside rail franchise. We are pleased that the importance of understanding passengers' needs is recognised and embedded in the process to let a new passenger franchise. Passenger Focus has based this submission on new and existing passenger research amongst users of c2c services.

Over the last 15 years, the c2c franchise has shaken off its 'misery line' tag to become one of the highest-performing rail companies in the country, both in terms of passenger satisfaction and in terms of punctuality/reliability. Yet there are still some areas where passenger satisfaction should be higher, as well as clear priorities for improvement in the next franchise. Passengers have told us the areas they most want to see improved are punctuality/reliability, frequency of trains, value for money, being able to get a seat, personal security and information at times of disruption.

According to the Public Performance Measure (PPM), which measures the proportion of trains arriving at destination within five minutes of scheduled, c2c is right at the top of the performance league. Yet passengers still put improving punctuality as one of their top priorities for improvement. The PPM score can conceal sources of passenger frustration: trains on time at destination but late at intermediate stations can affect many passengers returning home in the afternoon peak, and even a few minutes of delay can reduce passenger satisfaction.

Given that c2c is already scoring so high on the PPM measure, the time is now right to take punctuality to the next level and make Essex Thameside Britain's first Right Time Railway – driving further improvements by setting challenging targets for the proportion of trains that arrive Right Time or Early.

As with many commuter railways, overcrowding is a problem at peak times. With punctuality improvements continuing to drive increases in patronage, the expectation is that overcrowding will get worse. Related to this is frequency, which passengers consistently tell us is one of their top priorities for improvement. Passengers also say they want later evening and weekend services. The new franchise must contain provisions for addressing the expected growth by increases in capacity through the life of the franchise, as well as meeting passenger aspirations for higher frequency, later evening trains and improved weekend services.

Despite high levels of overall satisfaction, value for money remains a major concern for passengers. Ticket prices clearly need to be kept at an affordable level but there are a number of other measures that can be taken to increase satisfaction with value for money, including direct debit schemes for annual season tickets and carnets for less frequent commuters.

Recently, there have been a number of examples of train companies squeezing the validity of off peak fares by tinkering with restrictions. The effect has been back-door fare rises, sometimes of up to 20%, further damaging the credibility of the simplified fare structure introduced by the industry.

The way to restore this credibility is by preventing further reductions in the times of the day at which these tickets are valid. Ticket retailing has developed significantly with increasing numbers of internet and advance sales. Nevertheless a substantial proportion of c2c passengers still pay for their journeys on the day at ticket offices and ticket machines. The rail industry standard is that passengers should not have to wait more than five minutes at peak times and three minutes at off-peak times – we need to see these standards met.

There are a number of situations where the ticket a passenger needs is not available from ticket machines or information about ticket validity is not clear so they are forced to queue at ticket offices. If these issues were addressed it would not only help passengers by speeding up the ticket purchasing process but also help the industry itself. Passenger Focus research has shown clearly that there is a trust gap – passengers are not confident that they are getting the cheapest ticket for their journey. Part of the ticketing strategy for the franchise must involve closing this gap.

In most areas c2c does very well for passenger satisfaction compared with other London and South East train companies. An important exception is personal security – both at the station and on the train – an area where satisfaction is lower and it rates as one of passengers' priorities for improvement. This must be a priority for the new franchise to address and a clear focus on this area is needed for the life of the new franchise, including challenging passenger satisfaction targets.

Given the good record for punctuality and reliability, disruption to services happens relatively infrequently. But when it does, passengers are frustrated with the information they receive. There are industry codes of practice on how to manage disruption and provide information to passengers – these must be adhered to if this area of dissatisfaction is to be addressed. Technology-based services such as text alerts warning of disruption should not be premium charged-for services used by a few but should become the norm for how the train company communicates with its customers at times when its service is impaired.

For most aspects of the station and train environment, c2c passengers are relatively satisfied. So while substantial improvement need not be a priority for the franchise, it is important not to let existing standards slip. The best way to ensure this is through passenger satisfaction targets based on the National Passenger Survey.

In recent national research by Passenger Focus, shortcomings have been identified with the Assisted Passenger Reservation Service that helps disabled passengers to make use of the rail network. When a promise of assistance is made, it should be delivered. Clearer monitoring of the quality of the service is needed, along with action plans to address any problems identified. The franchisee should also make steady progress throughout the life of the franchise in making their rail network more accessible.